

## With a stroke of luck, Waterford resident gets his ring back




BUY PHOTO

Elias Hage, right, of Waterford thanks Keith Wille at the Waterford Community Center for finding his wedding band Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2016. Hage, who swims daily at Waterford Town Beach, lost his ring during a swim in July and had given up on ever finding it. Lifeguards at the beach continued the search and Wille, of New London, a metal detector hobbyist, was brought in and found the ring. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

Published August 23, 2016 6:39PM | Updated August 24, 2016 9:55AM

By **Martha Shanahan** (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=m.shanahan) Day staff writer

✉ [m.shanahan@theday.com](mailto:m.shanahan@theday.com) (mailto:m.shanahan@theday.com)  [martha\\_shan](https://www.twitter.com/martha_shan)  
([http://www.twitter.com/martha\\_shan](http://www.twitter.com/martha_shan))

Waterford — Elias Hage had been thinking that his wedding ring felt loose.

He swims three or four times a week at Waterford Beach, just one lap in the shallow water close to the sand and lifeguards.

Hage — whom everyone calls Lou — always wore his wedding ring while he swam, a white gold band with his initials and his wedding anniversary etched on the inside.

The thought occurred to him during a swim in July that he should probably leave the ring at home.

His 83-year-old hands swell in the winter, and a jeweler had resized the ring so it wasn't so tight, but because of medication and the summer weather, his fingers had been back to normal and the ring had started to loosen.

"This time in particular I said, 'this is foolish,' Hage said Tuesday. "I should leave it at home."

Just as that thought crossed his mind, the ring, of course, slipped off his finger.

Hage grabbed at the water, but watched as the ring dropped into the sand and disappeared.

"It was just floating down," he said.

Almost immediately, he lost hope that he would find it again. The ring is almost the exact same color as sand.

He stood up in the knee-deep water and searched with his hands for a minute or two. He swam to shore and told the lifeguards what happened.

But by then, he was sure he would never see it again.



BUY PHOTO

Elias Hage of Waterford returns his wedding ring to his finger after it was returned to him by Keith Wille Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2016, at the Waterford Community Center. Hage, who swims daily at Waterford Town Beach, lost his ring during a swim in July and had given up on ever finding it. Lifeguards at the beach continued the search and Wille, of New London, a metal detector hobbyist, was brought in and found the ring. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

"I was devastated," he said.

Hage was a teacher in Old Lyme for almost 40 years. The ring had barely left his finger since he married his wife, Eleanor, in 1960.

Eleanor was a teacher, too, at Mitchell College. They had four children. She died in 2011.

She volunteered a lot, and her obituary (<http://www.tributes.com/obituary/show/Eleanor-Nicholas-Hage-90986748>) included a story about a time that a local charity's food pantry had an excessive amount of canned pumpkin. She sent everyone home with cans of pumpkin and challenged them to make "Somethin' Pumpkin" for a bake sale.

The sale raised more than \$500, which she used to buy beans, rice and meat for the pantry.

Once they were off duty, the summer lifeguards at Waterford Beach waded into the water and started searching for Lou's ring.

They recognized the man from his almost daily swims at the beach, and wanted to help him.

"They stayed until dark," said Kelly Sullivan, the program coordinator for Waterford Recreation and Parks.

The lifeguards tried again the next day, and every day after that.



BUY PHOTO

Elias Hage, right, of Waterford thanks Keith Wille at the Waterford Community Center for finding his wedding band Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2016. Hage, who swims daily at Waterford Town Beach, lost his ring during a swim in July and had given up on ever finding it. Lifeguards at the beach continued the search and Wille, of New London, a metal detector hobbyist, was brought in and found the ring yesterday. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

Hage offered a \$100 reward for the ring, and signs went up at the beach.

Hage's son, who lives in Foxborough, Mass., had another suggestion.

"My son John said, 'pray to Saint Anthony,'" he said.

The patron saint of lost things would help, John said. So would someone with a metal detector, he added, but Hage already had given up. The ring was too lost for anyone, holy or otherwise, to find.

"I was just too embarrassed," he said. "I figured it was gone."

"My son prayed," he said. "I didn't."

Meanwhile, the lifeguards were still looking every day. And Keith Wille was looking for work.

Wille's day job is at Survival Systems USA (<http://www.theday.com/article/20110625/NWS08/110629656/0/Search>), a Groton survival education company. He's also an amateur metal detection enthusiast and lost jewelry finder. A freelance writer wrote about him in the New Yorker (<http://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/the-lost-jewelry-hunters>) a couple months ago.

According to his profile on a website called The Ring Finders (<https://theringfinders.com/blog/Keith.Wille/>), Wille finds people's lost wedding rings in snow, sand, water and grass a couple times a month. He collects an optional fee for small jobs, or just enough to cover gas and equipment he needs for trickier ones.

He gets calls from all over Connecticut and Rhode Island, he said Tuesday. Just this summer, he's posted success stories on the Ring Finders site from Groton (<https://theringfinders.com/blog/Keith.Wille/2016/07/wedding-band-recovered-groton-long-point-beach-groton-ct/>) and Westport.

Last winter, he wrote about finding a pair of rings buried in several inches of snow in a Waterford backyard.

Any piece of jewelry or metal he can't connect with an owner goes into a collection, where he just keeps them or makes them into framed pieces of art.

Just weeks after Hage watched his ring — his "tie" to Eleanor — sink to the bottom of Waterford Beach, Wille happened to call the Waterford Recreation and Parks office to ask if they had any potential clients.

They had just the guy, Sullivan said.

Wille, 29, went to the beach on Friday, where the lifeguards who haven't gone back to college yet showed him where Hage swims.

"They were very enthusiastic about it," he said.

He waded through the water for about an hour while the tide was low with his underwater metal detector, finding a lot of soda can tabs, some garbage and one costume ring.

Then, a small ping came into his headphones. There it was.

Wille put the gold ring next to the cheaper one he had found and took a picture with his phone. The Recreation and Parks office was closed by the time he called Friday, so it had to wait.

On Tuesday, the two men walked into the Recreation and Parks office a few minutes apart. Wille already had called Hage and described the inscription on the inside.

He had asked, "do you remember your wedding date?"

Of course, Hage said. Aug. 13, 1960 — almost exactly 56 years ago.

Hage hugged Wille in the office lobby, then looked at him like he was Saint Anthony himself. Wille pulled out a small metal box, and moved aside the tissues and pulled out the ring.

Hage slipped it back on his finger. Very softly, he said "yeah, that's it."

He handed Wille some cash and a piece of paper, covered in a testimony for the website written in his own handwriting. It was just an account of his emotions after the phone call when Wille told him he had the ring.

He also offered to buy the lifeguards a pizza for their hard work.

Wille took off his own wedding ring and held it next to Hage's finger. The two bands were almost identical, except for the color.

Wille began to explain how he takes his off whenever he's in the water, and before he could finish Hage interrupted him.

"I'm doing that now," he said.

[m.shanahan@theday.com](mailto:m.shanahan@theday.com) (mailto:m.shanahan@theday.com)